



How to Use Sex Trafficking Research: 10 Tips for Journalists

by Alex Trouteaud, Ph.D.

The topic of sex trafficking intrigues and outrages many news consumers. It's a complicated, nuanced social problem—often hidden from public view—that can challenge black-and-white perspectives on victims and offenders. Therefore, research studies are an important resource for journalists reporting on sex trafficking and prostitution-related harms. As someone who has researched this issue for the last decade, I offer the following 10 tips to help you navigate this emerging field of research.

1. Sex trafficking research is rarely good or bad. Each study has strengths and limitations.

It's uncommon to find a study on sex trafficking that is so bad there's nothing to learn from it. Conversely, it's rare to find a study so good that every finding holds. Almost all sex trafficking research is somewhere in the middle, mainly because it is a relatively new field of study and the activity is illicit, often underground. Sometimes a study might get labeled as bad because a headline inaccurately represents a researcher's careful claims. Instead of trying to make a single overall judgment on the quality of a research study, evaluate the strengths and limitations of each separate part: purpose, data type, methodology, and findings. Funding sources matter, too, though this should prompt questions about how the research team dealt with potential conflicts of interest, rather than automatically dismissing the study. Consult other researchers on each of these components to help you detect questionable conclusions and identify the most solid evidence, and refer to the [Journalist's Resource](#) for overall guidance on spotting warning signs.

2. Don't rely on a researcher's credentials and affiliations.

If only it were as simple as relying on credentialed university researchers! In practice, many university researchers struggle to conduct sex trafficking research because of onerous institutional review board limitations,¹ and because their work does not routinely bring them in

¹ Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), also called Human Subjects Review Boards, are federally-required oversight bodies within academic institutions designed to protect research participants from unethical and potentially harmful research activities. Some IRBs strictly interpret ethical guidelines in ways that make it impracticable for university researchers to study individuals involved in illicit or even dangerous activity, especially when minors are involved.

contact with victims or offenders. In addition to research done by university scholars, look for high-quality research from outside of academia, including law enforcement or victim services agencies, and even advocacy-driven nonprofits. While studies from these non-academic sources certainly deserve scrutiny, the same level of rigor should be applied to all research studies regardless of the author's credentials or affiliations. This is especially true of research that has not been published in a peer-reviewed journal (see the [Journalist's Resource](#) for an explanation of peer-review).

3. Avoid conflating prostitution and sex trafficking, but don't be afraid to investigate the commonalities between the two.

Anti-sex trafficking advocates are often criticized for conflating trafficking and prostitution. Yes, both advocates and researchers need to be careful with language. However, issue overlap and conflation are different. For instance, a research team studying sex trafficking offenders might focus on the role of sex buyers. The team will quickly discover in its background research that sex buyers who purchase trafficking victims are typically those seeking to pay for prostitution. Thus, the team may decide to interview all types of sex buyers to understand some of the market forces behind sex trafficking. This is the kind of issue overlap that affects research design, but it is not necessarily conflation. However, if that research team misleadingly described all their interviewees as "sex trafficking buyers," that would be the kind of conflation you should question.

4. Use caution when reporting on estimates, projections, and probabilities.

Because sex trafficking activity is hard to measure, many studies use data that are based on estimates rather than definitive counts. At face value, there is nothing wrong with this approach; even the U.S. Census uses estimates and projections to report on critical population trends. In fact, sometimes probability-based estimates are more accurate methodologies for studying sex trafficking trends because of the intensive labor and safety precautions necessary to identify and build rapport with victims and offenders. However, most social science researchers simply do not have the quantitative skills needed to make accurate probability-based estimates and projections. This can lead to the unfortunate side-effect of poorly conceived methodologies yielding outrageous estimates. The key is to understand each component of the study instead of just relying on a researcher's conclusions.

5. Also use caution when reporting on clinical case studies, internet content analyses, and law review articles.

Just as probability-based estimates of sex trafficking can be fraught with errors, so too can other types of research common to the field. Clinical case studies tend to provide rich detail of a limited number of participants (many with fewer than 10 subjects), but are insufficient for making broader conclusions. As a hypothetical example, if two out of the five survivors of sex trafficking studied in a clinical case study had "branding" tattoos from traffickers, would not

mean it's safe to say that that most—let alone 40 percent—of survivors are “branded.” Internet content analyses also tend to complicate sensible interpretation, as there is no way to know whether and how content is affected by website operators. Thus, in both cases these studies can be appreciated for new questions they might raise, or new anecdotes they identify, but should not be reported as if they were different types of methodologies, such as a large-scale survey. Lastly, law review articles can present claims intended to advance an argument, but which inadvertently exaggerate research claims in the process. It is always wise to check the studies on which law review analyses are based, rather than relying solely on the author's interpretation of those studies.

6. Always ask for the full report.

Don't just cite research numbers based on what a researcher tells you in an interview. It is always safer and wiser to cite a statistic or other finding from a written report. Not only are source (yes, even researchers!) prone to misremember or otherwise misrepresent research findings, but the written report typically provides information about a study's purpose that a source may be reluctant to share. For instance, if the written report reads like an advocacy piece rather than an analysis of the data, then you need to dig deeper into the components of the research to gauge strengths and weaknesses accurately.

7. Ask researchers about the findings; ask practitioners about the implications.

Researchers can overestimate their knowledge of the issue they study, and practitioners can overestimate their knowledge of the research behind their profession. Practitioners understand the day-to-day realities of dealing with service providers and law enforcement. Researchers who have never experienced these realities firsthand may be unaware of what their study's findings really mean for these professionals. Conversely, practitioners can be so close to the issue that they have a hard time seeing larger trends, perhaps because they interact with a narrow range of victims or offenders. Journalists should leverage the expertise and knowledge of both. Occasionally you will encounter researchers who are also practitioners, but even in this case it is best to identify a practitioner *not associated with the research study in question* about how the findings make sense in their real-world work.

8. Everyone has a bias; even those who have survived the sex trade.

Sex trafficking survivors are an important, yet often overlooked, voice in anti-trafficking research and advocacy. Their perspectives often differ from that of researchers for a variety of reasons. Survivors' lived experiences are inherently valid and therefore must be included in research programs. However, it is also important to understand the concept of “survivorship bias,” an academic term that applies to a variety of fields. “Survivorship bias” means that experiences associated with surviving an event tend to lead to unintentional biases in understanding the event (e.g., a survivor who was trafficked through a website could be more likely to believe every victim is advertised online). This concept is most critical when interpreting sex trafficking

research that draws heavily from survivor narratives. High mortality rates among trafficked persons, the stigma of prostitution-related labels, and a reluctance by some individuals to talk openly about experiences of sexual abuse mean that researchers and journalists rarely observe the full spectrum of survivor experiences.

9. Your reporting and headlines can affect the lives of vulnerable people, so think through unintended consequences.

You are likely keenly aware of the ethics of your profession, and for good reason. Local responses to address sex trafficking are still nascent, and not always well-planned or survivor-informed. The way media covers the issue can have a significant impact. Consider a situation where a local research team claims “thousands” of child sex trafficking victims are ignored in a mid-size American city. Such a finding is almost certainly an overestimate, but if a news outlet publishes it as fact, the unintended consequence could be that the local police agency believes the entire issue is a hoax. This belief can be hard to change, even if new research produces a more plausible estimate. In another example, a clinical case study might discuss in detail how a drug-addicted adult trafficking victim was able to heal through services provided by a faith-based residential facility. While accurate for this individual, a prominent news article suggested that this approach was relevant for all trafficking victims, and the unintended consequence was that additional victims were placed in similar facilities without regard for their faith-based preferences. In both cases, careful attention to the research would have likely still allowed for a compelling news story, but without the same negative consequences to victims.

10. This is a rapidly-evolving area of research, so check reliable sources for new information often.

Ten years ago there were just a handful of studies on sex trafficking, and most didn't even use that terminology since it was more closely associated with international sex tourism and smuggling of foreign-born victims. Today there are many high-quality studies on the issue that approach the phenomenon from different angles and perspectives. Next year there will be even more. So don't rely on the same studies year-after-year. Instead, invest in relationships with expert researchers who are following the latest studies and research trends closely. These sources can also help gauge the strengths and weaknesses of a new study's components.

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